

Looking at Animals

Is There a Third Choice?

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

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Everyone knows the origin of meat, but few want to face the facts. Sue Coe's art and Alon Raab's review [this issue, FE #349, Summer 1997] invite the reader to a "naked lunch," Burrough's pungent phrase for that moment when everyone sees what's on the end of everyone else's fork. But at this meal, it's a bloody carcass of a being that lived a miserable life and suffered a horrendous death before ending up as a burger on your plate.

Animal rights as theory and animal liberation as action erupted quickly and mostly unchallenged during this decade in the anarchist and radical environmental milieu, but given the almost universal instrumental use of our fellow creatures, it seems necessary to examine the ethical foundation for opposition to animal slaughter. This seems particularly the case if there is an expectation of sympathy for what is essentially a new paradigm for relating to non-humans.

My own 26-year abstention from meat and poultry was based initially on dietary and health concerns, but I continued eating seafood since it is part of the macrobiotic/Japanese diet which first influenced me. Later, when considering the ethics of ingesting flesh, I justified my diet based on my willingness to participate directly in killing. Having fished at different times in my life, I've caught (suffocated), beheaded, cut open and eviscerated fish before cooking them up.

By this yardstick, I held supermarket shoppers in contempt for buying so-called steaks or chops (euphemisms for what Carolyn Adams calls in her uneven *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, "the missing referent," i.e., the dead animal). Before dinner came in Styrofoam trays covered in plastic wrap, carnivores knew the slaughter process intimately. They didn't hide from their deed, nor did I. In this regard, hunters got off my ethical hook since they made the kill, saw the spark of life fade in their prey's eyes, and gutted the animal elbow deep in intestines and blood.

A demand today for meat eaters to conduct their own kill and butchering would undoubtedly create a massive jump in the number of vegetarians. Raab is right. Coe captures the horror of meat eating so dramatically that after seeing her graphic depictions one can only continue to eat meat by way of a process of tremendous denial.

Since the 1980s, however, my abstention from dead land creatures has been reinforced increasingly by a realization that the mass production of animals is a catastrophe for the environment. A "simple" bacon cheeseburger contains the wreckage of range lands in the West, pig shit-choked rivers in the south, and millions of unnecessary petrochemical drenched acres of crop land to provide feed for livestock.

Unfortunately, the seas are faring as poorly with factory fishing. Whole so-called fish stocks, salmon in all the entire North Pacific rim nations, cod and haddock in the Atlantic to name only a few, are disappearing from oceans and rivers at such a rate that we may be seeing the last of these wild creatures. (Industrialized tuna fishing has been called "the last buffalo hunt.") Modern fishing methods are so indiscriminate that often as much as 60 percent of a catch is "waste," unwanted species which are discarded overboard. Habitat of non-targeted creatures is disrupted by fishing, threatening them as well.

Sea creatures produced in offshore fish farms are no less harmful for wildlife or the nearby environment. In the entrepreneurs' mad attempt to maximize profit by controlling everything from weight to color of their "product,"

they introduce dyes and antibiotics, which when combined with massive concentrations of fish waste in coastal areas, gravely threaten native species and water flora.

The destruction/production is also bad for people. The nightmare slaughterhouses Coe describes have worsened in recent years—more unsanitary, more dangerous—as white, mid-Western, union workers have been displaced by Laotian, Latino, and even Somalian immigrants only days off the boat from Africa. Wages have plummeted accordingly as the formerly privileged sector of the working class is kicked out along with their unions which, at least, defended minimal living standards and comparatively humane working conditions (for humans, that is). Now, it's not unusual to see Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agents, used to working the barrios of southern California, suddenly making a mass raid on an Iowa Beef Processors plant in Storm Lake, Iowa searching for undocumented laborers.

We Are Omnivorous Animals

Any one of these issues—personal health, the environment, or labor ought to be enough to signal the end of meat eating by radicals or other people of conscience. Yet, for the most part, it doesn't. Maybe the reason is that we are omnivorous animals and meat eating has been deeply and perhaps (who knows) irrevocably rooted in human societies since the Paleolith.

But any attitude or custom can change, and animal rights theorists are asking (or demanding) that the respect and privileges conferred on humans be extended to other creatures. We are the only animals that act out of ethical considerations, hence, it is a uniquely human function to assign rights by virtue of popular perception—that is, how a human group (women, native people, minorities, etc.) or nonhuman entities (animals, trees, rivers, mountains, etc.) are considered by most people in a given area at a given time. Rights are a slippery proposition; they are granted either by custom or document and can be withdrawn as easily as they are assigned. You can be fully empowered with rights one minute and the next you're off to a reservation or death camp.

Anchoring rights as emanating from a god or as being "inalienable" only plays well if you can back it up. In a sense, all talk of rights is facile; what we want is what is enforceable in the real world. How we deal with animals is equally arbitrary. This culture says it's alright to kill and eat pigs (which are smarter than dogs), but kill Fido and you face jail time.

Some people argue it is ethically unacceptable to kill our fellow creatures since the avoidance of pain and the experiencing of pleasure is the measure of an act. However, most people are aware of but willfully ignore the "hogsqueal of the universe" (Upton Sinclair's vivid phrase describing the abattoir in his early 20th century book, *The Jungle*). They prefer their pleasure over the animal's pain.

To those who believe animals are fully invested with rights equal to humans, their killing is by definition "murder," a word Raab effortlessly employs in his first paragraph. But murder must have a perpetrator, as well as a victim; does this mean people, including our friends and families, who unreflectingly eat meat or wear leather shoes have committed acts comparable to taking a human life? What about native people whose hunt is permeated with ritual and appreciation of the life given to the hunter? Dead is dead, Raab argues, regardless of whether a steer is killed by a bolt gun to the head in a slaughter house or an antelope by an arrow in the forest by a hunter who sees the fallen creature as his relative.

Addressing the crucial question that humans should not eat the flesh of other animals, one argument suggests that although many animals besides humans are predators, we are the only species which can choose abstention. Is it here that the ethical imperative lies?

Animals are directed toward the kill by their genetic constitution, but why is the carnivorous predilection, so common in people, less "natural" than when practiced by instinctive impulse? If you oppose a human eating a bird, say a pigeon, should you be equally appalled when one is killed by a Peregrine falcon? I've seen one of these magnificent birds swoop down on its flying prey at 80 miles per hour from atop a huge building, sending out an airborne spray of white feathers and blood before taking the catch back to its perch to be ripped apart by her and her brood. To say dead is dead allows for no distinction between rednecks at a pigeon shoot in Hegins, Pennsylvania,

an endangered bird, or Amazonian Hoarani hunters. If life is undifferentiatedly sacred, does it matter if the act of taking an animal's is genetically driven or willful?

According to the absolutist argument, incantations mean little to the victim. But where does this leave the Inuits and Masai, tribes in which animal protein is crucial for their survival, and in the case of the former, absolutely without alternative? Are they murderers, as well? Can there be a mutuality between animals and people, without rights, so under the proper relationship, such as expressed by native people, a life is taken within an ethical context?

Ultimately, it is the absolutism contained in the sentiment about murder which worries me. How close does such an extreme formulation come to that of right-wingers who similarly charge abortion is murder? No one in the U.S. animal rights movement has yet gone to the lengths of the fanatics who bomb clinics or kill their personnel, but is the philosophical groundwork there?

Maybe there is a declarative statement that can be offered based on something other than our "feelings." That is, you say animals shouldn't be for human use; someone else says it's OK. Who's right? Is it possible to establish absolutes when there is no external or heavenly affirmation of either point of view?

A good starting point for a perspective that has the capacity for validation beyond our emotions is environmental philosopher Aldo Leopold's sense of holism. This is best articulated as a "land ethic" in his classic 1949 book of essays, *Sand County Almanac*. It says if we love our planet and its inhabitants, we must come to conclusions about what constitutes its biotic integrity.

A simple and seemingly adequate description of this state of affairs would be the condition which existed before the heavy hand of man (gender specific noun intentional) took a commanding role in the biosphere and began an instrumental redefinition of our relationship to flora, fauna and things. Leopold states, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

Destined for Burgers or Coats

But be advised: this formulation can leave domesticated animals destined for either burgers or coats without the ethical protection animal rights advocates demand. Domesticated animals, particularly in their modern form of production, are unacceptable when considered in terms of Leopold's precepts, but he had no objection to either hunting or meat eating when it was done within the context of sustainability.

The modern meat industry and its support requirements such as mass agriculture do monumental harm to biotic integrity. The reason to abstain from flesh in this culture seems much more firmly founded in protection of the earth than in animal suffering. All eating causes death, and some suffering. That's the "life economy" described by ecologists, recognized by primal animism and archaic traditions such as Buddhism.

Hence, farm animals aren't deserving of the protection we should afford wild life since, not only is their existence usually inimical to their feral brethren, but also that they can only exist as human artifacts, literally animal machines functioning solely as adjuncts to their masters.

Unfortunately, there is nowhere to turn on the question of domesticated animals. The call by some animal rights activists to "free" the inhabitants of the pig pen, hen house, and stockyard would assure their deaths no less than their current destination. (In the few areas where domesticates are capable of surviving, such as feral pigs on Hawaii or wild cats in Australia, their presence constitutes another assault on fragile ecosystems.)

Also, the land ethic would not, in many cases, afford absolute protection even to animals in the wild. For example, much is made of so-called hunt sabs, the organized interference with hunters by scaring away prey or bravely (or foolishly) standing in the line of fire. To be sure, disgusting spectacles like fox hunts by the English rich or the Hegins pigeon shoot we reported on last issue makes me root for the disrupters, but can this protection be transformed into an absolute?

Deer Should be Eliminated

An island off the coast of Maine I've visited is overrun by deer, descendants of ones introduced 50 years ago to provide sustenance for the fishermen during the hard Atlantic winters. Now, with the same food available on the island as anywhere else, the deer are ignored and have multiplied to the point where they may be responsible for extirpating as many as a hundred native plant species and threaten the rare Fringed Gentian growing there in proliferation. What would the land ethic dictate? Simply that the deer should be eliminated given the harm they are causing to the biotic community. Cruel, but fair, as the line from Monty Python goes.

We are asked by people advocating full rights for animals to choose not to kill or accept the results of killing. But how far, should this extend? Some people, evoke the criterion of sentience, the ability to think and cognitively, rather than reflexively, react to pain. This would eliminate flies and mosquitoes from protection, yet some East Indian religionists wear gauze masks to keep from inhaling unwary insects. Should we not kill at all? How about tomato worms or slugs eating our gardens?

I'm glad I'm asking these questions rather than attempting to answer them. It's a conundrum that in many ways can only be resolved with absolutist arguments. But even an absolute doesn't seem to resolve the issue. For instance, when I see a demonstration of 40 people outside of a furrier in a wealthy Detroit suburb, but only one of these same faces (an FE associate) at a protest to stop chemical dumping in the St. Clair River adjacent to a native people's island, it's hard for me to take their concern for minks seriously. Involvement in the latter would protect the environment, animals and people (us!). The other seems so narrowly focused as to be hardly worth the effort.

Though there are committed anarchists involved in both animal rights and radical environmental work, the above example seems to be more the rule than the exception. Everyone will do the political work their conscience directs them to, but it doesn't seem unreasonable to suggest at least some prioritization for a small, radical environmental and anarchist movement already marginalized by an utopian vision. In a culture where meat eating and animal usage is almost universally affirmed, trying to dictate diet on the basis of absolutist ethics seems like a hopeless undertaking, but, hey, I suppose one could argue no more so than advocating an anarchist revolution.

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